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“Work as if You Live in the Early Days of a Better Nation”:
Experiments in Poetics and Justice

Hi my name is Chris Fremantle and I’m a researcher and producer – I’m a Senior Research Fellow at Gray’s School of Art in Aberdeen and I also work as a producer, particularly in arts & health but also in art & ecology.

I was invited to join this panel at the suggestion of Elizabeth and Robert with whom I’m working on a Land Art Generator project for Glasgow. Elizabeth and Robert will have outlined the underpinning rationale for the Land Art Generator Initiative so I’m not going to rehearse that. Rather, I’ll briefly highlight why Scotland provides a relevant and even provocative context for the Land Art Generator Initiative.

I had four reasons for inviting Elizabeth and Robert to bring LAGI to Scotland. [SLIDE 2]

Firstly, the Scottish Government has set a series of targets for the transition away from carbon based society. In 2009 The Scottish Government passed the Climate Change (Scotland) Act which set targets of an interim 42 per cent reduction by 2020, and an 80 per cent reduction by 2050.

Secondly, the Scottish environment – the lands and seas – have significant capacity for exploitation by the renewable energy industry. This can be summarised as follows:

- a. According to the advocacy body for renewable energy in Scotland there is currently nearly 8 GW of renewables currently operational across onshore and offshore wind, hydro/wave/tidal, solar and bio. There is a further 13GW in planning or construction.¹
- b. WWF says in a 2014 advocacy report “It’s estimated that Scotland has the largest offshore renewable energy resources in the European Union (25% of the EU’s offshore wind and tidal power, 10% of the EU’s wave power).”²

Thirdly the wider changes affecting our understanding of the Scottish landscape particularly through Land Reform intersect with the contestations associated with renewable energy. The 2003 Land Reform Act passed by the Scottish Government gave communities a right to buy and this has resulted in a significant number of Scottish Sporting Estates coming into community ownership. The Scottish Government has set a target to double the amount of community owned land in Scotland to 1 million acres by 2020 (5% of the land area of Scotland).

The other side of this is of course that where these estates are still owned privately Wind is providing a new income making the rich richer.

Finally Scotland has a very strong ‘creative sector’ by which I mean artists, designers, architects and landscape architects. Scotland’s visual artists have a significant international

reputation, questionably known as the Glasgow Miracle, but the architects, landscape architects and designers are also dynamic. The Scottish Ecological Design Association is 25 years old and a new generation re-addressing the social dimension of architecture and design.

Previously Elizabeth and Robert had kindly asked me to write an essay for 'New Energies', the publication of the 2014 Copenhagen competition, and I took that opportunity to explore the link between art, energy and social/environmental justice.

I started that essay with the Isle of Eigg in the Outer Hebrides. Eigg, with its population of 80 people is important to me because of the renewable energy system developed as part of the Community Buyout of the Island from an absentee landlord. This 'moved' the island from being sort of 1950s Scotland, all diesel generators, to being at the leading edge of what living in a low carbon society might be like. Interestingly when this was reported on the national news one of the key aspects was omitted. They didn't mention that each house and business has a 'cut-out' limiting the number of appliances that can be run simultaneously: 5kw and 10kw respectively. This self-imposed mechanism was perhaps understood by metropolitan journalists as a negative where in my perception it was a keystone – social and environmental justice built into a new social order.

It seems like all the Community Buyouts of rural estates are using renewable energy as a key element of their economic model. The Land Reform Act of 2003 has instigated a major exercise in local

empowerment across rural Scotland. This is regeneration in rural Scotland. In urban areas 'Regeneration' is usually modernising or redeveloping brownfield or 'run down' areas. Curiously it is also in these contexts that Local Energy Grids are, of necessity, being developed. The National Grid limits the amount of power that can be contributed from community scale renewables. Curiously (necessity being the mother of invention) we may see more localism in our infrastructures.

Local empowerment has increasingly literal as well as metaphorical dimensions if you'll excuse the pun.

That gives you a bit of context.

Scotland's energy industry moved offshore in the 70s with the discovery of oil in the North Sea – Sue Jane Taylor has spoken about her observation of the lives of the oil workers. Before that it had been firmly onshore – coal and shale oil. The Scottish landscape is marked by those industries.

I'm going briefly talk about two specific points where artists have engaged with energy land and seascapes seeking conceptual shifts.

The first addresses the landscape impact of shale oil, and yes this is directly related to fracking. During the late 19th and early 20th Century Shale Oil production in West Lothian, the area around Edinburgh, formed a significant industry which left a series of

blings, [SLIDE 3] the local vernacular for industrial spoil heaps, across the landscape.

In the mid 70s the British conceptual artist John Latham undertook a Placement under the auspices of the Artist Placement Group, an organisation he had co-founded, within the Scottish Office in Edinburgh.¹ One of the APG Principles was the Open Brief. This meant that the artist determined what was significant during the first couple of months of the Placement. Latham worked within the Scottish Development Agency's Urban Renewal and Derelict Land remits and had access to the 'Graphics Group' and their archive of aerial photography. This led Latham to focus on these Bings.

Latham re-presented these back in artworks and publications as 'process sculptures'. [SLIDE 4] When I first came across these works, I assumed that Latham was a Land Artist in the US tradition, shaping these spoil heaps, but this is not the case. Rather his action was wholly conceptual and perceptual. He re-designated the bings as 'monuments to the period we live in', and over time that re-designation has stuck. 20 years after his placement some of the bings have been designated as national monuments. They have also been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Biodiversity Action Plans have been prepared. Latham's reframing of the bings is perhaps an archetypal example of one of the things artists can do: [SLIDE 5]

Tell us "This isn't what you think it is."

Point out "This rubbish is actually incredibly valuable."

¹ Richardson, Craig, 2007, MAP Magazine #11 <http://mapmagazine.co.uk/8787/john-latham-incident-person/> accessed 8 August 2016

Imagine dumping spoil as 'process sculpture'.

Propose that a spoil heap is as important (and as beautiful) as a 3000 year old monument. "The waste product of our energy industry is a modern monument equivalent to Maeshowe on Orkney."

The second example I'm going to touch on is Alec Finlay, Laura Watts, and Alistair Peebles' Primer for Marine Renewable Energy, 'ebban an flowan', published this year. [SLIDE 6]

One of the characteristics of Scottish art, particularly visual art, over the past 25 years has been a 'mining' of place and identity. This has taken a multitude of forms but has not infrequently involved the revisiting of an existing or historical vernacular reimagined in relation to contemporary concerns.

Finlay is a poet in the tradition of concrete poets and walking artists and he has pursued an inquiry into renewable energy over a considerable period. This includes his project Skying (2007-2012) as well as research into E.W. Golding, [SLIDE 7] pioneer in the development of wind energy on a site in Orkney in the 1950s. Watts is an anthropologist and Peebles a photographer.

'ebban and flowan' sets out on the assumption that just as fishing has a vernacular language local to each port and harbour, so wave and tidal energy will generate their own vernacular forms.

This isn't such a simple suggestion as it might seem. Vernacular language and local dialect are marginalised and erased by national

structures such as the mass media. Equally industrial production and globalised trade have tended to erase the distinctiveness of local production except where it has become fetishised. Everyday tools such as hammers are generic even if cheese is 'from' somewhere. [SLIDE 8]

Energy is perhaps one of the ubiquitous generalities. Electricity has no local form. Oil's very dominance is precisely because of its transportability. Therefore the proposal of a vernacular for marine renewables seeks that it remains localised on some level.

The Foreward to *ebban an flowan* says,

This book illustrates a number of tide and wave energy devices, and lists some of their characterful names. It also explores the technical vocabulary, which is evolving along with these marine energy devices. We have gathered together maritime dialect expressions from across the Norse world, connecting the older lore and languages of the sea with the new lore of energy generation. Perhaps tide and wave engineers – or 'wave-wrights' as we might title them – may turn to the lore of mariners, fisherfolk, and even mythic selkies or tangies, for new names and expressions; a language of marine energy growing from older words, lodged in collective memory.

This concern to root marine renewables in place and Latham's representation of the waste of a previous cycle of energy extraction

as a site of national importance both ask us to pay a different sort of attention to energy.

I used Alasdair Gray's Aphorism as a title for this piece because it asks us not to slip into the stale habitualities of whichever particular history is relevant whether that's political, cultural or poetic.

¹ <https://www.scottishrenewables.com/sectors/renewables-in-numbers/> accessed 8 August 2016

² Scotland: A Renewable Powerhouse, 2014, WWF
http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/powerhouse_1.pdf accessed 8 August 2016